5

Consistent Eschatology

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)

If William Wrede's approach could be characterized as a consistently sceptical attitude towards the historical value of the Gospels, Albert Schweitzer's approach was consistently apocalyptic (or, in his terms, consistently 'eschatological'). While Wrede regarded even the earliest of the Gospels as already shaped by early Christian belief, Schweitzer believed that the story of Jesus as found in the Gospels is quite comprehensible, provided that the apocalyptic context of Jesus' thought is taken into account. In this sense Schweitzer picked up, developed, and popularized the work already done by Johannes Weiss. Indeed Schweitzer's work would come to so overshadow that of his predecessor that Weiss's contribution is today sometimes overlooked (a state of affairs which Schweitzer himself would have been keen to avoid).

Born in the village of Kaysersberg in Alsace, the young Albert Schweitzer was brought up in the nearby town of Günsbach, where his father worked as the Lutheran pastor. After attending the *Gymnasium* (academic high school) in Mulhouse, he began his advanced studies at the University in Strasbourg, studying also in Paris and Berlin, before completing a Licentiate in Philosophy (on the work of Immanuel Kant) and in Theology (on the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper). His most prominent teacher during this period was the New Testament scholar H.J. Holtzmann (1832-1910), who in 1863 had produced a ground-breaking study of the synoptic gospels. In 1901 Schweitzer published his first major work on the historical Jesus, entitled *The Last Supper in Connection with the Life of Jesus and the History of Early Christi-*

anity, the second part of which (issued separately) was headed *The Secret of the Messiahship and Passion—A Sketch of the Life of Jesus*. (It is this second part which was translated by Walter Lowrie and published in English, in 1914, under the new title *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*.) Schweitzer's next major work was a survey of the existing literature on the historical figure of Jesus, published in 1906 as *From Reimarus to Wrede: A History of the Life-of-Jesus Research* (translated into English by W. Montgomery under the more memorable title *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*). Although Schweitzer later extended his research into the world of Jewish apocalyptic to produce two books on the theology of the apostle Paul, it is his first two works on Jesus, which have exercised the greatest influence on New Testament studies. In 1913, having added a medical qualification to his already impressive qualifications in music, philosophy and theology, Schweitzer left his native land to work as a doctor among the peoples of the Gabon district of French Equatorial Africa, a work which he continued (with some interruptions) until his death in 1965. While Schweitzer was widely regarded as a living saint during his lifetime, being awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1952, his work as a medical missionary has recently become controversial. However, that controversy need not detain us, for it is Schweitzer's scholarly work which is of significance here.

The reader may be surprised that the following extract does not come from Schweitzer's most famous work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. However, that work is essentially a survey of the scholarship, in which Schweitzer outlines his own position only in a final chapter, while dealing simultaneously with the views of William Wrede. A clearer presentation of Schweitzer's eschatological view is to be found in his earlier work, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*. Indeed it is this work to which Schweitzer makes reference when he summarizes his position in *The Quest*. Translated by Walter Lowrie and published in 1914, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* is the second part of Schweitzer's 1901 study, originally published (as noted above) under the title *The Secret of the Messiahship and Passion—A Sketch of the Life of Jesus*. In the first chapter of the work, Schweitzer outlines the depiction of